MAINE PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT NETWORK SYSTEM



Maine Department of Health and Human Services
Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC)
(Formerly Bureau of Health)
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**ADVISORY - Important Information **

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TO: All Hospital Emergency Departments, All EMS

FROM: Dr. Sheila Pinette, Director - Maine CDC

SUBJECT: Carbon Monoxide Alert for Emergency Departments

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Carbon Monoxide Alert for Emergency Departments

With high winds and snow expected for Maine Friday and Saturday, power outages may affect many Maine households. Hospital emergency departments should be on alert for carbon monoxide poisonings due to improper placement and operation of gas-powered generators and other alternative cooking and power sources.

Carbon monoxide poisonings during storm-related power outages are well documented. After Tropical Storm Irene hit Maine and New England in August 2011, carbon monoxide poisoning was the cause of two deaths and four non-fatal poisonings in Maine. In each case, the carbon monoxide came from improper operation of generators during the power outages that followed the storm.

A study of a CO poisoning outbreak in the aftermath of the January 1998 Ice Storm found that improper placement of a gasoline generator, such as in a basement or garage, could increase the risk of CO poisoning by 20 to 300-fold.

Alert for Hospital Emergency Departments

Carbon monoxide poisoning shares many of the same symptoms of the flu, but without the fever. In a study of the outbreak of CO poisoning following the 1998 ice storm, the most common presenting symptoms were headache (69% of cases), nausea (51%), dizziness (48%), fatigue (31%), vomiting (21%), chestpain (9%), shortness of breath (6%), and loss of consciousness (8%). These symptoms were associated with blood carboxyhemoglobin (COHb) levels ranging from 2% to 50%, with a median of 14%. Some individuals with elevated COHb levels were asymptomatic, and were identified because another household member had symptoms. Background COHb levels in nonsmokers is typically under 2% and for smokers is under 9%.

Reference: Daley R, Smith, AE, et al., An Outbreak of Carbon Monoxide Poisoning After a Major Ice Storm in Maine, *J. Emerg. Med.*, Vol. 18 (1):87-93, 2000.

Carbon monoxide poisoning was made a notifiable condition in April 2008.

All cases with clinical signs, symptoms, or known exposure consistent with diagnosis of carbon monoxide poisoning, and/or a carboxyhemoglobin level equal to or above 5% are now reportable to the ME-CDC. Carbon monoxide poisoning is a Category II notifiable condition, and thus should be reported within 48 hours. Use the same disease reporting lines as used for all notifiable conditions: 1-800-821-5821 (phone); 1-800-293-7534 (fax).

CO Poisoning Prevention Guidance

- Place generator outdoors in the fresh air. Keep it more than 15 feet from windows or doors. Do not put a generator in a closed or partly closed space, like a basement, cellar bulkhead, or attached garage. Carbon monoxide can build up to dangerous levels in these spaces.
- Make a plan for how to keep your generator dry and protected from rain so you are not tempted to bring it inside a garage or other enclosed structure. Generators also pose a risk of shock and electrocution, especially in wet conditions. Dry your hands, if wet, before touching the generator.
- **Do not use** outdoor cooking devices, such as grills or camp stoves, indoors.

• Place a carbon monoxide detector that is battery powered (or has battery back-up power) outside each sleeping area. CO detectors are in most stores. Look for the UL mark with the "Single Station Carbon Monoxide Alarm" statement.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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